

# *A Study on the Crisis Narrative of the Fable Series Novel "The Species of the Earth"*

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**Abstract:** As black women writers living in African-American minority areas, Octavia E. Butler's fable series "Seeds of the Earth" trilogy "Fable of the Sower" and "Fable of Talent" framed a series of crises suffered by ethnic minorities in African-American southern areas during the rapid development of American society from the late 1920s to the 1940s. The writer aims to reveal the crisis, face the crisis directly, reflect on the crisis, and call on the human subject to take active actions in order to cope with and resolve the crisis. This paper attempts to interpret the three crisis states faced by African-American minority areas in the "Species of the Earth" trilogy: religious crisis, identity crisis and survival crisis, and to explore the positive actions that need to be taken when facing the crisis.

## **1. Introduction**

Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) is a famous African-American female science fiction writer, who enjoys a good reputation in the science fiction field. For a long time, American science fiction literature was dominated by white male writers<sup>[1]</sup>, while black writers and female writers were completely ignored. But Butler challenged the tradition of sci-fi literature, and her writing represented the transformation of sci-fi literature, and her writing style was called "African Futurism". She herself has a strong sense of crisis and hardship. She has constructed a unique way of crisis observation and narrative in the trilogy "Seeds of the Earth", and at the same time, she has generated a reflection on crisis discourse, providing various possibilities for facing and solving the crisis. It is found that the occurrence of crisis events mostly stems from the sudden change of normal social order or the crisis inheritance under certain social background conditions. There are three crisis States faced by African-American minority areas: religious crisis, identity crisis and survival crisis. Crisis has a certain mutation and transitivity, but the relationship between crisis and opportunity is dialectical and unified to a certain extent, and there is a feasible strategy of "opportunity" in crisis<sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2. Crisis narrative**

Crisis narration is the writer's narration of the crisis events and the behavior of coping with the crisis, and it is the writer's appealing expression of the crisis events<sup>[3]</sup>, which does not exclude fiction and imagination. Crisis event is an objective existence in which experienced events and non-experienced events are intertwined. This means that in crisis narrative literature, there is

fictional freedom in narrative person, narrative perspective, narrative time, etc., but this freedom is not an unrestrained free imagination of crisis events. The writer is not imagining a crisis that does not exist, but points to the real crisis in a fictional way, revealing the crisis consequences such as ecological crisis, ethical crisis and scientific and technological crisis that have not been or have been triggered by crisis events. The crisis that has happened will always pass, and it will inevitably happen again. In science fiction literature, crisis narration is very common, and the writer aims to awaken the subject facing crisis events and promote the positive action of human subjects.

In the science fiction trilogy "Seeds of the Earth", Octavia Butler sets the background in the perilous year of 2024-2035. The natural environment of the Earth has deteriorated sharply, the American society and economy are in peril, and the new slavery system has risen quietly ... Butler focuses on the African minorities in the crisis vortex, tracks all kinds of crisis events they have suffered, and presents us with the religious crisis, identity crisis and survival crisis that people in African minority areas have suffered. The crisis narration in science fiction literature is not just a mapping and fiction of the crisis subject and the crisis event itself, but an attempt to dig the root of the crisis<sup>[4]</sup>, explore the path to resolve the crisis and move towards a new life in destruction.

### 3. Religious crisis

#### 3.1 Crisis of religious belief

The fable series of "The Species of the Earth" describes a series of persecution suffered by ethnic minorities in the southern African region during the rapid development of American society from the late 1920s to the 1940s. Faced with such an unbearable experience, American traditional Christianity showed a dangerous signal, which was eliminated by the church and headed for self-destruction. Traditional Christianity, which takes faith as its core, ignores the existence of human beings, and places its hopes on the future, promising believers the promise of going to heaven after death. However, in the era of frequent disasters, people realized that traditional Christianity could not extricate them from the real crisis, and traditional Christianity had a serious belief crisis and theological dilemma. Traditional Christianity has been questioned and crisis, and the disaster society has brought unprecedented value confusion and lack of faith, and people don't know what to do. The religious baptism ceremony is a kind of responsibility and guarantee for many believers to a greater extent, but in most people's hearts, they are not so keen on religion, and even have different religious beliefs.

Butler outlined from multiple perspectives that after the collapse of religious belief, people no longer have spiritual fetters, and the relationship between individuals, communities and individuals and communities is divided and alienated. There are great differences in the choice of individual religious beliefs, and the internal group also suffers from disintegration crisis because of religious differences. African ethnic minorities, represented by Lauren's family, are facing the collapse of their beliefs, not only the collapse of their individual beliefs, but also the crisis of their beliefs. In the process of trying to remove the crisis of religious belief and rebuild the brand-new religious belief of "Seed of the Earth", the crisis of religious education and communication of "Seed of the Earth" reveals the gap between the vision of "remodeling and changing" and the reality of communication and popularization<sup>[5]</sup>.

#### 3.2 Religious Education and Communication Crisis

The communication of religious education has a certain degree of intergenerational communication, and usually families and ethnic groups have the same common beliefs. Family education is a person's original education, but in the author's narrative, the priest's father has

different religious beliefs from his daughter. Keith and Lauren, born in the same family, also have different religious beliefs. Lauren's personal beliefs have not affected his younger brother Keith at all. In Keith's view, his father's religious baptism ceremony does not care. In Keith's view, God is only the reliance of adults to scare people and make them obedient. Judging from this situation, there is a real crisis in religious education.

Similarly, religious communication has also experienced different degrees of crisis. Every religious disseminator preaches that his religion is the one that holds the only truth. The members of his church are in heaven, while those who convert to other religions are tortured by hell. Inevitably, Lauren's "seed of the earth" is also called "that cult" by other sects and "a mountain cult that absorbs children and worships demons". The original members of the earth species were only 13 members, including the founder and her husband. Such a small number of religious groups were not conducive to the spread of religion to a certain extent, and there were still a certain number of members scattered in the later missionary process. Even in the spread of the later seeds of the earth, Lauren's younger brother Mark disagreed with the acorn community in religion and politics, and thought that the seeds of the earth were unrealistic fantasies. The independent choice of religious belief has become an unavoidable practical problem.

The church not only represents a simple religion, but also represents a group, which is the spiritual belonging of a group of believers. To a certain extent, the emergence of religious crisis also means the emergence of a turning point in religion. Lauren's "species of the earth" can be said to be a scientific and rational religion. The teachings of Seeds of the Earth are similar in form to the traditional Tao Te Ching in China. Lauren combined religious belief with community construction and change. It was the teachings of Seeds of the Earth that supported people to tide over the difficulties in the disaster and established the acorn community. In the doctrine of the seeds of the earth, the individual life is related to God on an equal footing, and the individual can get the chance of salvation through hard work and construction<sup>[6]</sup>. The core of religious belief lies in the creator's idea of God. Lauren explained the doctrine of the earth seed "God is change" by borrowing the relative justice system of the Bible. Lauren, the hero, uses the Bible to be flexible, and creates a brand-new belief system for herself, which endows the "species of the earth" with sacredness, legitimacy and rationality, and at the same time endows human survival with transcendental sacred significance. The seeds of the earth guide, cleanse and purify people's spiritual world in chaos and danger.

#### 4. Identity crisis

Identity consists of core identity and relational identity. Researcher Hao Lali believes that to some extent, defining identity should not be defined by the characteristics shared by individuals<sup>[7]</sup>, but by the problems faced by individuals. In the abstract, it is the dilemma faced by the community that defines the identity of the individual. When families, groups and ethnic groups encounter difficulties, the original situation of harmony and unity is broken, and each individual is faced with different levels of identity crisis. In the confusion and growth of different situations, identity crisis has different ways of presentation.

##### 4.1 Personal identity crisis

Individual identity crisis refers to the loss of individual self-worth and self-meaning when individuals face differences in gender, age, race and class. In the trilogy "Seeds of the Earth", this personal identity crisis is clearly reflected in the protagonist Lauren and her mixed-race daughter Larkin.

Lauren, the protagonist, is faced with an inherent crisis of individual identity. First of all, she is

the offspring of drug addiction with extrasensory syndrome. Hypersynaesthesia syndrome is the ability to experience other people's emotions, and it can be an immersive feeling. If ordinary empathy is a positive ability, then excessive empathy will make a person lose himself. However, others can't understand what they perceive, so patients with synaesthesia syndrome often feel deep loneliness and alienation. In front of outsiders, Lauren must pretend to be normal and be cautious. She can't reveal her details and hide her empathy syndrome from the outside world, otherwise she may be in danger. Secondly, Lauren is also facing an identity crisis as a woman. In order to survive, Lauren disguised herself as a man, which made Lauren's gender orientation tend to be blurred to some extent. But only in this way can we live, because male identity is less likely to be persecuted and more likely to survive than female identity in a turbulent social environment. In the male-dominated social form, the identity of female individuals has been challenged and is in a passive position.

Larkin, the daughter of Lauren and Banquer, is a mixed-race, and also suffers from the crisis of individual identity. When he was taken away at the age of two months, this little individual deviated from the acorn community and was forced to leave his biological parents who were called heretics, thus the parent-child relationship was interrupted for a long time. Then she was forced to change her role and enter a new family as an adoptee. Her name was even tampered with by others, and her unknown biological parents and vague emotional connection with adoptive parents were all manifestations of her identity confusion to some extent. However, such an identity crisis is inevitable for Larkin herself. The complexity and strangeness of the environment she lives in and the social relations she faces with all kinds of people make her unable to gain recognition from the people around her. The ambiguous relationship between her and her stepfather, and the sexual assault and protection from her stepfather also aggravated the tragedy of Larkin to a certain extent, and the writer added a lot of personal identity confusion and crisis to this character.

## 4.2 Ethnic identity crisis

The crisis of ethnic identity refers to that in the process of collective migration and diaspora, when facing the new social system and cultural environment in their new homes<sup>[8]</sup>, they face a series of institutional restrictions and developmental obstacles, fall into the dilemma of "group boundary", have no sense of geographical belonging, and the group falls into the dilemma of identity. In Butler's works, African minorities in the southern part of the United States have fallen into the dilemma of ethnic identity.

The African-American minorities in the southern part of the United States are neither pure Americans nor pure Africans, and belong to a mixed ethnic group to some extent. Therefore, it is necessary to study the identity of blacks in African ethnic minority areas in the United States based on the racial relationship between black and white. The crisis of ethnic identity usually occurs in the process of ethnic migration, and the challenge of racism will force people to fall apart. Usually, in the face of complex social reality, African-American minorities are usually treated unfairly, and the policy will never be inclined to their side<sup>[9]</sup>. The laws and religious beliefs of ethnic minorities are usually unprotected, and they are always in a weak position and oppressed state, and even lack the right to speak.

The bloodiest description in the second part of "Seeds of the Earth" is that the people in Acorn community were enslaved and put on slave collars, and people were sent from Acorn community to labor camps. In the author's description, "because of the prison's architectural structure, it is easier to isolate prisoners than the acorn community, not only from society, but also from each other." The people in the acorn community are suffering from such inhuman persecution, which further strengthens the ethnic crisis.

## 5. Survival crisis

Butler has long been concerned about the living conditions in ethnic minority areas in the United States. The series of "Seeds of the Earth" is a masterpiece reflecting ethnic minority areas in the United States and even the whole United States. However, due to the sudden death of the writer, only two of the original six-volume series were completed. In the fable series, Butler did not unfold the crisis narrative according to the chronological sequence which is consistent with the narrative sequence and the story sequence, nor did he have the non-chronological narrative in which the narrative sequence and the story sequence were suddenly interrupted or solidified, but adopted the reverse chronological narrative which combined flashback, pre-narration and interlacing (flashback and pre-narration were mixed).

Flashback refers to telling the story in the past. Larkin, Lauren's daughter, knows many events such as her parents' love story, enslavement, fire survival, the creation of "the seed of the earth" and the establishment of acorn community in flashback. Pre-narration refers to fast-forwarding to the future to tell the story. The time of the story extends from 2024 to 2035, and the story rooted in interstellar is realized in the future time and space. There are also flashbacks and previews used alternately. In Larkin's narration, there are diaries about her mother, descriptions of her father's Memories of Another World, and stories about her uncle, while telling her own story at the same time, interspersed with her own impromptu comments. On the time limit of narration, the writer gives a detailed description of the fatal influence of fire, water and drugs on people and the plot of the protagonist Lauren and his younger brother Marcos wearing slave collars, while briefly describing the plot of how human beings survive on another star.

As a science fiction novel, "The Seed of the Earth" does not describe the novel sci-fi elements in detail, nor does it describe another space-time universe in detail, but describes various crisis events on the earth, which proves that the writer's focus is on the crisis events on the earth where human beings live. On the issue of narrative frequency, Butler repeatedly narrates the same type of crisis events in the story, such as the repeated narration of the fire in the text, the repeated description of the same dream flying into space, and the repeated emphasis on drug abuse. The repeated mention of the same type of crisis events in Butler's narrative is enough to highlight his attention to the crisis.

Relying on science fiction literature, the writer shows the picture of the survival crisis of American society from the late 1920s to the 1940s. In addition to natural disasters such as earthquakes and storms, there are also social disasters such as hunger wave, drug injury, mob rule, plague, gang struggle and refugee migration. Thieves, rapists and cannibals emerge one after another, and mankind has encountered an unprecedented crisis of survival. American society is falling apart bit by bit, and the country is back to 200 years ago. The writer adopts the simulated narrative strategy and writes about the extremely severe survival crisis faced by human beings.

However, why is there such a serious crisis in the future society? First of all, the unfair treatment of society and the inaction of the government have caused social unrest and people are in dire straits; Secondly, the implosion of people in American society and the reconstruction of new civilization on the ruins of old civilization have caused many problems; Thirdly, the struggle of American social power relations triggered the survival crisis. For example, Lauren, the black female character in the writer's works, has survived dangerously in a society full of complicated power hierarchy. The writer's existential crisis can be resolved and properly solved, and all the answers are hidden in the doctrine of the species of the earth:

*"Everything you touch.*

*You changed everything.*

*Everything you've changed*



*Are changing you.  
The only eternal truth  
Is to change.  
God is change. "*

Lauren believes that only by constantly remolding and changing can individuals carry out meaningful and constructive undertakings, break the survival dilemma and realize their survival. After the destruction of the old community, the acorn community, which was founded by Lauren, was extremely inclusive. From scratch, from small to large, from being burned to being rebuilt, this group has accepted countless life individuals who have encountered crises, accepted all those who have braved the wind and waves in the crisis, and carried the survival of many life individuals in order to realize the perfection of individuals and the unity of the community.

## 6. Conclusion

Although Butler wrote about the religious crisis, identity crisis and survival crisis suffered by some ethnic groups in the southern minority areas of the United States, such a crisis narrative is enough to arouse the reflection of readers around the world. Instead of the great events and figures described in traditional sci-fi literature, the writer pays attention to the living conditions of marginal people through the diaries of micro-individuals. Different from the macro-or fantasy-like crisis events of survival in previous science fiction literature, the writer discusses the concrete crisis events suffered by individuals and groups of life. Instead of repeating the major crisis events that have happened and exaggerating the crisis events with sci-fi themes, the writer provides certain solutions and paths for the crisis events. Butler reminds people to pay attention to crisis events through his pessimistic prediction of the future. From a certain point of view, every living individual living in different situations may be a survivor, bearer or prophet of past or future crisis events. Although people in different social and historical backgrounds have experienced different crisis events, the ways to deal with crisis events are generally consistent to some extent. This is precisely the significance of writing this paper.

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